

The Desire for Motherhood in Federico García Lorca's *Yerma: A Psychoanalytic and Feminist Exploration*

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Abstract:

This paper explores Federico García Lorca's *Yerma* (1934) from the perspective of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, focusing on the main character's engrossed yearning for motherhood as both an intuition and a cultural norm. Incorporating findings from Shekari et al. (2015), Ngo Tran (2020), and Nimra Saeed and Mamona Yasmin Khan (2025), the study establishes *Yerma* within Lorca's broader portrayal of women's suppression in patriarchal Spain society. This research paper aims that *Yerma*'s barrenness represents the spiritual crisis of a culture that defines womanhood by fertility, and her final act of revolt symbolizes the psychological shatter between intuition and moral law.

Keywords:

Lorca, *Yerma*, Feminist theory, Psychoanalytic, Motherhood, Patriarchy, yearning, intuition and moral law.

Federico García Lorca's *Yerma* (1934) stands as one of the most heartrending portrayals of feminine torment and suppression in modern drama. As part of Lorca's acclaimed Rural Trilogy besides *Blood Wedding* (1933) and *The House of Bernarda*

Alba (1936)- Yerma reveals the tragic emotional confinement of women in a deeply patriarchal and convention-bound Spanish society. Set against the backdrop of rural Andalusia, the play transforms the social landscape into a psychological space where desire, repression, and duty collide. Lorca's poetic realism fuses elements of folklore, music, and rural superstition with the symbolic and psychoanalytic depth of modern theatre, allowing him to penetrate the inner world of his female protagonist.

Yerma, whose name itself means “infertile” or “barren,” becomes the representation of a woman whose recognition and self-esteem are devastated by her impotence to conceive. Her unfulfilled yearning for motherhood reveals the moral severity and cultural regression of a society that measures a woman’s value purely based on her productivity. Lorca’s poetic use of language and imagery; dry earth, flowing water, and the cycles of nature- expands this barrenness above the personal to imply the spiritual crisis of an entire civil society.

As Shekari et al. (2015) rightly pointed out, Lorca’s women characters “serve as emotional and spiritual reflection of Spain itself, wounded by silence, yet radiant with suppressed passion.” In Yerma, this observation finds its most intense realization: Yerma’s suffering becomes a national fable, reflecting the immobility of a society that denies emotional and creative freedom to its women. Her barrenness, therefore, is not merely biological but emblematic—a symbol of both personal desolation and cultural decay. Through this tragic narrative, Lorca crafts an intense feminist and psycho-symbolic reflection on identity, suppression, and the price of conformity.

The objectives of this research are to:

1. Examine Yerma’s psychological and emotional journey through the lens of psychoanalytic theory.
2. Analyze the feminist implications of motherhood and patriarchy in Lorca’s work.
3. Explore the interplay of symbolism, nature, and repression in Yerma’s characterization.
4. Establish intersexual links between Yerma and Lorca’s other female figures in Blood Wedding and The House of Bernarda Alba.

Lorca’s women characters have been studied in-depth for its blend of realism, symbolism, and tragedy. Shekari et al. (2015) illustrates Lorca’s women as figures ‘crushed by Spanish customs and social life,’ whose pain embodies collective resistance. Saeed and Khan (2025) argue that Lorca’s dramas ‘expose the deeply rooted patriarchal order that reduces women to instruments of domesticity and reproduction.’ Ngo Tran (2020) extends this by identifying Lorca’s use of poetic language as a ‘dreamscape of repression,’ where silence and repetition reveal the

unconscious. These readings inform the present study's synthesis of feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to *Yerma*.

This paper applies feminist and psychoanalytic theories to examine the interplay of suppression, yearning, and identity in *Yerma*. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray have shown how patriarchal discourse confines women's identity to motherhood and obedience. Psychoanalytic thinkers like Freud and Lacan elucidates the role of repression and desire in molding individualism. *Yerma*'s plead for motherhood becomes a forecast of the unconscious- a manifestation of what Lacan calls the 'lack' that defines human instinct.

Federico García Lorca's *Yerma* is a tragedy of womanhood confined within the twin-walls of biology and morality. *Yerma*'s intense urge for a child becomes not only her only purpose but also her downfall. Through her psychological agony, Lorca reveals the violence of a society that relates a woman's significance with her matrix. Her tragedy arises not merely from infertility, but from the internalization of patriarchal ideology- a social conditioning so powerful that her unconscious itself turns against her.

At the core of *Yerma* lies a tormenting paradox: the very longing that shapes *Yerma*'s sense of self also devastates her. Her utterance in the initial act, "My body is arid like a twig" (Lorca 14) conveys more than physiological sterility. It signifies psychological dryness, the shriveling of her inner life within a society that appraises her solely as a bearer of children. This linking of personal value with fecundity forms the foundation of her catastrophe. In psychoanalytic vocabulary, her libido, the generative vital energy Freud associates with Eros has been suppressed and redirected into an obsessive preoccupation with maternity. The Psychology of Desire and Repression

Yerma's association with Juan is stripped of intimacy or tenderness, devoid of the affection, dialogue, and mutual care that might sustain a healthy conjugal bond. Their matrimony, like the arid land they inhabit, has become barren, emptied of emotional nourishment and drained of any vitality or passion. *Yerma* laments, "You leave me here alone. I'm bored. And every night the same thing. Every night I hope you'll come to me... but you just sleep" (*Yerma*, Act II, Scene 1). Her statements expose both emotional neglect and sexual inhibition, highlighting the profound solitude and frustration she endures within her own home. Lorca makes it evident that *Yerma*'s craving for a child is also a longing for sensual and spiritual union, a deep-seated desire for closeness, recognition, and shared affection that patriarchal morality constrains and suffocates. In this restrictive social environment, her most natural impulses for love, intimacy, and fulfillment are silenced, transforming her yearning into a painful internal conflict that intensifies her psychological torment.

According to Freud, repression converts instinctual energy into psychological disturbance. Yerma's mind wavers between longing and remorse, between natural impulse and imposed morality. When she consults the old woman who proposes that she take another man to conceive, Yerma instinctively pulls back: "I'm an honest woman, and I'll die an honest woman" (Yerma, Act III, Scene 2). At this moment, the unconscious conflict becomes unmistakably pronounced. Her innate urge for motherhood collides with the internalized "law of the father," a concept later articulated by Jacques Lacan to denote the symbolic social order that regulates sexual identity and normative behaviour. Yerma's unwavering loyalty to this patriarchal code, even when it condemns her to anguish, demonstrates how ideology can evolve into a form of psychological captivity. Her refusal to transgress socially sanctioned boundaries reveals not only her moral rigidity but also the depth of her conditioning, showing how cultural expectations infiltrate the psyche and shape one's desires, choices, and sense of self. Through Yerma, Lorca exposes how the burden of honour, purity, and obedience becomes an invisible cage, trapping women within a cycle of internalized guilt and self-denial. Go Tran observes that "in Lorca's universe, desire and death are twins; one seeks to affirm life, the other to end its suffering" (Ngo Tran 45). Yerma's desire, when perpetually frustrated, begins to mirror death itself—a longing that can only find release in annihilation. The play's lyrical rhythms and silences evoke what Freud called the return of the repressed: every time Yerma suppresses her instinct, it returns with greater intensity, shaping her dreams, her speech, and ultimately, her violence.

Lorca's use of earth imagery aligns Yerma's body with the natural world. The land is barren; the wells are dry; the air is still. Yerma, too, feels dry inside, like a broken jar that nothing can fill. The metaphor of the dry earth reflects the psychoanalytic idea that the unconscious, when denied expression, turns arid and lifeless. The repeated imagery of water, streams, milk, fountains, symbolizes fertility and the creative impulse of life. But in Yerma's world, these elements are absent, signifying not only her personal infertility but the collective sterility of a moral order that represses desire.

The old woman's earthy sensuality provides a counterpoint to Yerma's chastity. She tells Yerma that the blood is what rules. The blood is what gives life—Her words echo the instinctual philosophy Lorca celebrates the wisdom of the body, the acceptance of natural passion. Yet Yerma cannot embrace this; she is caught between instinct and ideology. Her tragedy, then, is not that she is childless, but that she cannot reconcile the voice of nature with the voice of morality.

Shekari et al. portray Lorca's female figures as "emotional and spiritual reflections of Spain itself, scarred by silence, yet glowing with restrained passion" (Shekari et al. 2386). Yerma's sterile body thus transforms into the symbol of an infertile Spain, a society muted by its own oppressive customs. Her suffering is not merely individual

but cultural, a lament of the suppressed feminine essence against the inflexibility of patriarchal tradition.

Feminist scholars such as Nimra Saeed and Mamona Yasmin Khan have highlighted how Lorca stages the societal monitoring of female desire. In *Blood Wedding*, the Bride's exclamation—“Cut from my honest neck the chain you've set there” (Lorca, *Blood Wedding*, Act III)—signifies defiance against ethical restriction. *Yerma*, likewise, carries such unseen shackles. The community surrounding her operates as an instrument of scrutiny. When the washerwomen chatter that *Yerma* has been wed for two years and still has no child, they convert a natural misfortune into a moral deficiency.

These voices of gossip act like the Superego in Freudian psychology, an internalized social authority that imposes guilt and shame. *Yerma*'s repeatedly laments “”I am a dry stream”” (*Yerma*, Act II, Scene 2) and expresses many a time that if she could be able to bear a child like other women! reveals how her desire is shaped by collective expectation rather than personal fulfilment. The feminine self, Lorca suggests, is socially constructed through language and judgment.

In this context, *Yerma*'s catastrophe corresponds with Simone de Beauvoir's claim in *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” *Yerma* is fashioned into a woman through the demands of her society, and when she is unable to fulfil them, she is rendered an aberration, a “non-woman.” Her sterility therefore reveals the duplicity of a culture that consecrates motherhood while stifling female sexuality.

Yerma's husband Juan represents the practical, material logic of patriarchal Spain. He cares more for honor and property than for emotional intimacy. *Yerma*'s husband tells her, “The sheep in the pens, and women in their houses.”, “Don't you know the way I think? The sheep in the pens, and the women in their houses. You're out too much! Haven't you always heard me say that?”, besides he tells *Yerma* that he should force her to stay inside: “I should force you; lock you up, because that's what a husband is for!” His insistence on confinement mirrors the control of the Church and family over women's bodies. Lorca subtly portrays this domestic imprisonment as spiritual death. *Yerma*, longing for vitality, compares herself to the flocks and the fields: “Even the sheep have their lambs, and the birds have their nests. Only I am empty.”

Freud's notion of sublimation, the conversion of instinctual energy into socially sanctioned conduct, illuminates *Yerma*'s behaviour. Deprived of sexual and emotional satisfaction, she redirects her vitality into obsessive preoccupations with motherhood. Her nurturing impulse becomes compulsive. This sublimation, however, deteriorates into neurosis when the societal conditions for fulfilment are obstructed. Her relentless

pacing, her conversations with the shepherd and her intense imaginings of cradling a child all disclose this psychological breakdown. Go Tran observes that Lorca's plays, transform the private sphere of the home into a theatre of repression. Yerma's home, with its empty cradle and silent walls, becomes a prison of unfulfilled potential, a psychological womb that can never give birth. The structure of the play itself mirrors this claustrophobia: the dialogue grows shorter, the songs darker, the spaces narrower. The play moves from the open fields of Act I to the enclosed space of the shrine in Act III, symbolizing the gradual suffocation of Yerma's psyche.

Lorca's musical composition, a blend of poetic song, incantation, and silence, embodies what feminist psychoanalyst Hélène Cixous terms *écriture féminine*, or the inscription of the female body in writing. Yerma's melodies are simultaneously emancipating and confining. When she sings, "My breasts are full of milk, but my child does not come," she articulates her repressed yearning, but also her powerlessness. Her chant shifts into a dirge, resonating with ancient Andalusia folk cadences, part supplication, part malediction.

Silence, likewise, becomes a mode of articulation. As Luce Irigaray argues, women's muteness within patriarchal discourse often indicates the impossibility of articulation inside a male-centred language. Yerma's extended hesitations, her unvoiced bitterness toward Juan communicate profoundly. Lorca's stage directions intensify that Yerma remains motionless, gazing at the ground, as if anchored to it. She has merged with the desolate soil, both confined and desolate.

Shekari et al. note that Lorca's heroines embody "personal pain transformed into collective memory" (Shekari et al. 2387). Yerma's silence, then, is not weakness but defiance—a refusal to participate in the language of oppression. Her body becomes her final text.

The culminating moment of Yerma unfolds at the pilgrimage sanctuary, where women seek blessings for fertility. The location is emblematic: religion, which ought to liberate, becomes yet another mechanism of domination. The women intone ritual hymns, yet their songs resemble invocations of surrender. Yerma's voice ruptures this collective chanting like "God has abandoned me. I am hollow, hollow!" This outcry signifies the breaking point of repression; the outburst of what Freud terms the death instinct (Thanatos), the drive toward annihilation that emerges when the vital forces of life are obstructed.

When Juan prohibits her from seeking spiritual or bodily alternatives, Yerma throttles him in a moment of ecstatic release. "I myself have slain my child!" she cries at the end. The utterance, ironically, conveys both remorse and emancipation. In psychoanalytic terminology, this act represents the breakdown of repression; in

feminist terms, it signifies the eradication of patriarchy's grip over her body. The symbolic "child" she destroys is the patriarchal construct of womanhood—one that equates moral virtue with motherhood.

Lorca's tragic irony resides in revealing that liberation, for Yerma, can be attained only through devastation. As Ngo Tran observes, "Lorca's heroines attain freedom only in the instant they embrace ruin" (Ngo Tran 49). Yerma's deed converts her from a passive victim into an active agent, albeit at the expense of life itself.

Yerma's rebellion finds echoes in Lorca's other female protagonists. In *Blood Wedding*, the Bride's forbidden passion leads to death; in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Adela's suicide becomes her only act of resistance. Across these plays, Lorca constructs a female archetype of revolt—women who dare to feel, desire, and transgress in a world that demands silence. Saeed and Khan argue that Lorca's plays "reveal the clash between individual emotion and collective morality," portraying women as "the site of that eternal struggle between love and law" (Saeed and Khan 2207). Yerma epitomizes this struggle: she is the battlefield of body and soul, instinct and doctrine.

Psychoanalytically, Yerma embodies what Jungian theory might characterize as the anima damaged by civilization. Her ruin is the consequence of a society that rejects its own life-energy, the feminine force of creation. Lorca's Spain, governed by patriarchal Catholicism, dreads both the body and its desires. Yerma's catastrophe, therefore, surpasses the individual; it indicts an entire cultural system that stifles vitality under the guise of virtue.

Yerma confronts Juan by telling him that while he toils to provide for the household, her efforts are directed toward fulfilling her own body. She contrasts his focus on material harvests, such as wheat, with her own preoccupation with the bodily substances of life, milk and blood. This confrontation captures Lorca's symbolic contrast between masculine materialism and feminine vitality. The house—Juan's realm—symbolizes property and social hierarchy; the body, Yerma's realm, signifies instinct and creativity. When the two become incompatible, devastation follows.

Her ominous silence at the conclusion of the play is not surrender but metamorphosis. In destroying Juan, Yerma annihilates the symbolic "husband" of patriarchy, reasserting her individuality even amid desolation. Her silence following the act reflects the hush of the earth after a tempest, brief stillness laden with potential.

Yerma's calamity resides in her incapacity to exist beyond the ethical codes that shape her identity. She yearns for motherhood, yet that yearning is tainted by societal expectation. Psychoanalysis interprets this as repression redirected inward; feminism

understands it as absorbed patriarchy. Lorca merges these layers into a singular poetic emblem—the infertile woman as both casualty and insurgent.

Through her, Lorca challenges the myth of “the virtuous woman” and unveils the psychological cost of moral absolutism. Yerma’s final outcry, “I have killed my child!”, reverberates far beyond the stage. It becomes the voice of every woman who has been deprived of expression, desire, and the right to self-definition. In death, she attains what life denied her: autonomy. Her womb may remain void, but her voice resonates through the silence of history.

Federico García Lorca’s *Yerma* endures as a profound investigation of repression, yearning, and defiance. Viewed through the intersecting perspectives of feminist theory and psychoanalytic critique, Yerma’s aspiration for motherhood appears as a battleground where societal law confronts innate impulse. By incorporating observations from Shekari et al. (2015), Saeed and Khan (2025), and Ngo Tran (2020), this study illustrates how Lorca’s lyrical realism lays bare the consequence of defining women exclusively through reproductive capacity. Yerma’s infertility evolves into a symbol of the spiritual desolation of a patriarchal society, while her revolt, though tragic in its outcome, reclaims a measure of her selfhood. Her silence transforms into articulation, becoming a resonant voice of defiance against moral suppression. In this way, Lorca reveals that true liberation, however fleeting, arises when the oppressed confront and dismantle the structures that confine them.

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